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ABSTRACT

By the late 19th century, the new universities in the United States had become so closely intertwined with the research imperative that their future depended on their position at the center of knowledge creation. The tension between the liberal arts college and the "modern" research university initiated a process of differentiation that would define both institutions. The result was a system of hierarchical oppositions founded on the privileged institutional status of the new research university over the traditional liberal arts college: university vs. college; national vs. local; research vs. teaching; theory vs. practice, etc. The prevailing conception of writing as a set of skills, a tool of scientific method rather than an epistemic activity itself, helped to confine writing and rhetoric within the preparatory sphere of the degraded college. Ironically, the reorientation of some composition specialists from "hapless bottom feeders" to endowed chairs has come about through the acceptance of values, assumptions, and practices that have traditionally enforced the hierarchical oppositions sometimes deplored in rhetoric and composition. No longer can rhetoric and composition scholars look to the traditional literature/composition binary to explain the hierarchy of productivity in English departments because they themselves preserve and maintain the marginalization of teaching through the employment of professional criteria and the powerful, regulating force of academic authority, scholarly publishing. (Contains 12 references.) (TB)

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An Economy of Class Differential:
Productivity in Composition Studies

Values peculiar to publication were institutionalized in the new American research university of the 1870s as standards for pedagogy, hiring, and advancement. In the humanities, an archival awareness of the disciplinary "conversation" came to be seen as a necessary precondition for useful pedagogy; professional scholarship became the content of seminars and lectures, and standards of its construction were gradually and implicitly adopted as a sorting device for graduate students. In this way an interdependence between the production, distribution, and consumption of specialized scholarship became inseparable from a process of professionalization. The advancement and hiring criteria of the pre-Civil War college system--devotion to teaching, school, and community--were insufficient to adjudicate the worth of those trained to contribute to a population of scholarly specialists. The professional university managers that arose commensurate with the new university formalized hiring, rank, and tenure decisions based primarily on publication--a privileged conception of "work" that unlike teaching is assessed by other professionals and, not least important, quantifiable. The institutionalization of what would be called the "scholarly

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ethos" insured that the university would reproduce itself in accord with the standards of publication.

By the late nineteenth-century, the new American universities had become so closely intertwined with the research imperative that their future depended on their position at the center of knowledge creation. As Hugh Hawkins explains, "[i]f the university rested its case before society solely on its role as teacher, then by implication other institutions might as well control the search for new truth" (302). The tension between the liberal arts college and the "modern" research university initiated a process of differentiation that would define both institutions. By the 1890s, specialization was being conceived by university promoters as the end result of a pattern of intellectual development that began with the B.A. and ended with a graduate degree. In 1898, William T. Harris defined graduate training as the "second stage . . . of higher education" (qtd. in Higham 6-7). Undergraduate education, according to Clark University president G. Stanley Hall,

makes broad men, the other sharpens them to a point. The college digests and impresses second-hand knowledge as highly vitalized as good pedagogy can make it, while the university, as one of its choicest functions, creates new knowledge by research and discovery. (qtd. in Thwing 419).

The primary result of such an arrangement was the development and maintenance of a system of hierarchical

oppositions founded on the privileged institutional status of the new research university over the traditional liberal arts college.

university	college
national	local
research	teaching
theory	practice
science	technology
truth	opinion
objectivity	subjectivity
substance	style
literature	composition

The prevailing conception of writing as a set of skills, a tool of scientific method rather than an epistemic activity itself, helped to confine writing and rhetoric within the preparatory sphere of the degraded college. While the attitudes arising from this institutionalized hierarchy helped to prohibit the formation of rhetoric and composition for some three-quarters of a century, ironically enough, the "field" or "discipline" would find its way into existence through that very hierarchy. Although frequently masked by the rhetoric it generates, and certainly not immutable, scholarly publishing--and its attendant dualisms, hierarchies, and resulting inequities--has changed little in the past one hundred years.

The reorientation of some composition specialists from "hapless bottom feeders" to endowed chairs has come about through the acceptance of values, assumptions, and practices that have traditionally enforced the hierarchical oppositions sometimes deplored in rhetoric and composition. Not least important in this regard is the implicit reconceptualization of the nature,

and relative value, of "work" performed by those who focus on composition. The rise of PhD programs in rhetoric and composition, the expansion of publication opportunities, the necessity of publication for advancement, and the privileged status of textually-constructed theory are breeding an elite class of composition specialists.

The contemporary field has been constructed by those imbued with a specialist, professional ideology appropriated from established academic "disciplines." These values--legitimized and extended by scholarly publication--perhaps inseparable from it--are furrowed deeply into the institutional landscape. Through a process of professionalization the huge group of non-publishing composition teachers--once grouped by vocation if not profession--are now effectively marginalized or devalued even within the context of rhetoric and composition. No longer can we look to the traditional literature/composition binary to explain the hierarchy of productivity in English departments. Ironically, then, a field dependent on teaching for its very origins currently preserves and maintains the marginalization of teaching through the employment of professional criteria and the powerful, regulating force of academic authority, scholarly publishing.

In a 1966 Isis article, George H. Daniels constructs a framework to explain the professionalization of the sciences in the nineteenth-century American university. According to Daniels, the professionalization of an academic field begins

through a process he terms preemption. This procedure takes place in a "period of emergence" in which a task that has customarily been performed by one group or by everybody in general comes into the exclusive possession of another particular group. This . . . occurs when the body of knowledge necessary for the task becomes esoteric, that is, when it becomes obviously unavailable to the general[ist]. (152)

In a 1982 College Composition and Communication article, Maxine Hairston exhibits the confluence of rhetoric and composition and the sort of academic professionalism we've come to label disciplinarity. Hairston declares an impending "paradigm shift" in composition studies finding, not surprisingly, the "most promising indication" in the work of "specialists who are doing controlled and directed research on writers' composing processes" (85).

Hairston's article is instructive not only in the privilege it assigns to published truth claims that she labels "research," but in the conviction with which the research/teaching hierarchy is revealed. According to Hairston, the group of "people who do most to promote a static and unexamined approach to teaching writing . . . probably includes most . . . teachers of writing." Writing teachers who can't or don't read the professional literature are "probably doing more harm than good" (79).

The process of making composition "obviously unavailable," in Daniels' terms, to the non-specialist through a process of

preemption, of bringing it into the "exclusive possession" of a group of specialists, is completed by Hairston in the tacit and unquestioned sanction of published research. Teachers without knowledge of the professional literature are teachers without knowledge: "they are frequently emphasizing techniques that the research has largely discredited" (80--my emphasis). Hairston's claim does not privilege any one theory or method; it recommends that effective teaching demands knowledge--possession--of the professional literature itself.

As Hairston's article demonstrates, the subordination of "local" values--primarily teaching--to professional values reflects the degree of importance placed on the primary material incentive for advancement, scholarly publication; and it is published scholarship that defines the dichotomization of labor in composition studies. Familiarity with and production of scholarly manuscripts designates the essence of academic professionalism. While the PhD functions as certification for tenure-line entry into the university, status, success, and prestige adhere to those with the strongest ties to the professional population of publishing scholars.

As Alain Touraine argues, a social hierarchy based on the possession of knowledge replicates the economic system in which it is contained. "At the head . . . are those whose knowledge is greatest and, who are above all, apt to develop furthest. They constitute a capital that bears interest, for they are constantly producing new knowledge" (140). Academic publications in

composition have been likened to poker hands (Connors, "Journals") and naval vessels (Hashimoto), yet their direct relationship to advancement and monetary success recommends understanding them as professional currency. Once legitimized by composition's "epistemic court," the knowledge products of individual professionals are transformed into marketable currency, and therefore power, for the individual professionals who compose them. The very materiality of a textual product promotes this exchange value. Itself an extension of other texts, every published article is a potential locus for continued profitability as an artifact to be possessed and assimilated in later ventures.

Defined, on the other hand, by what they are/have not, non-publishing writing teachers are the economically disadvantaged. The vast majority of those who each year teach writing to four million freshman students are neither producers nor consumers; they simply do not engage in the exchange of valid academic currency. Their work is transitory and predominantly oral; they write, literally, in the margins--of students' texts. They are evaluated chiefly by those defined by their very lack of knowledge, students. Their own experience systematically discounted through the institutional privilege of textual authority, non-publishing teachers are implicitly defined as clients for theoretical claims validated by the professional publication industry.

In the decade since Hairston's "Winds of Change" few such overt, specific instances of teacher bashing have been recorded. The condition that North described in 1987--"Researchers and Scholars find out what there is to know, and then pass that knowledge along to Practitioners" (331)--has become tacit in composition studies as a sort of institutionalized clientism. Elizabeth Rankin, for example, describes the sort of teacher to whom she would lend credence in this way:

[W]hen an experienced, enlightened composition instructor--say one who's been teaching six or eight years and keeps up with CCC, College English, and Rhetoric Review--tells me that writing groups "work" in her classes, I'm likely at least to pay attention to her claim. (Rankin 266)

Rankin confirms that educational certification, the satisfaction of hiring criteria, and teaching experience are finally sanctioned only through the influence of the publishing industry.

And what, we must finally ask, is not? Once we recognize the inescapability of the observation that rhetoric and composition, the academic discipline, is nothing more than the professional discourse itself, we must credit the enterprise with whatever emerges from it. Current debates in the field are products of written scholarship itself; any answers can be visualized only through a lens ground (or grounded) in the present professional order of scholarly publishing in rhetoric and composition.

And while we may bite the hand that feeds, there is no danger of drawing blood--efforts at resistance through publication are inevitably exercises in cooptation. "[W]e all, when given the opportunity . . . wind up perpetuating the system instead of attacking it" (Markley, "Discussion" 81). This does not suggest, of course, that the publishing system is immutable, only that by its very function it appropriates the claims of its authors, tacitly re-authorizing them in a larger, institutional context. And every disseminated text carries within itself the potential for self-justification. Janice Lauer once confidently asserted that if published scholarship "does inspire action and change . . . this action in turn provides a type of validation" ("Composition" 24).

The academic publishing system, which commodifies and regulates an ever-expanding line of knowledge products and fabricates their necessity, is a replication of the larger economic system that contains it. In effect, it creates a hierarchy of interdependent producers and consumers, and defines acceptable parameters for the manufacture, distribution, and consumption of product. The emergence of the now-tacit assumption that acceptable writing instruction necessitates ownership of edited knowledge products is different not in kind from the process by which curious innovations, like the lightbulb, progress to daily necessities.

When writing is conceived of as a simple skill, a tool that can be mass produced by anyone who understands the rules,

commonality and ease of acquisition keep its value low. Berlin reminds us that it was once imagined that writing instruction could be left almost entirely to highschool teachers, presumably with little more than their own high school experience to guide them. Graphite and wood are plentiful, and the process of fashioning them into a pencils is cheap and easy.

However, when writing is conceptualized as an epistemic activity--not simply a golden egg but the goose that laid it--its value increases rapidly. As the pencil has given way to the more effective, expensive, limited, and specialized word processor, should it surprise us that the once state-of-the-art, nineteenth-century rhetoric textbook--that remained unchanged through countless editions--should be devalued by a line of knowledge products--scholarly books and articles--that can be utilized only with specialized technical training obtained at great cost, and therefore available to a relative few? The claim, "rhetoric has achieved a new currency," resonates wildly. And as our folding legal tender continues to give way to magnetic strips, so too does the printed publication stand on the verge of replacement by the electronic journal.

That rhetoric--an asset that could be commodified and exchanged--emerged in a democracy is only incidental to its origin in a free market economy. It should come as little surprise that its period of greatest prosperity would coincide with the rampant acceleration of late capitalism and the unparalleled alliance of mass education and the economic values

it serves. Rhetoric emerged in the controversy of the marketplace; rhetoric has always been bought and sold. The privilege of trading in its currency now demands a much more significant ante, and the strength of its exchange value reflects our swelling claims regarding its necessity. That it would be appropriated, assimilated, metabolized by the very economy it claims to make possible is perhaps inevitable. Once again, rhetoric has become expensive.

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